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The CIA in Laos: waging war in secret

US role in Indochina model of the 'presidential war'

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At the time, which seems so much longer ago than it really was, William Colby still served as director of the Central Intelligence Agency.

The man interviewing him on TV was trotting out the old nonsense about the CIA's failures being known to all the world, while its triumphs, by the nature of the Great Game, must remain forever secret. Would Mr. Colby, nonetheless, cite a successful CIA operation?

Now, surely, the director would overcome his modesty and mention one of the successes his agency had so tirelessly leaked over the years - the overthrow of Mossadegh in Iran, maybe, or of Arbenz in Guatemala.

But, without an instant's hesitation, the director offered up an entirely different golden oldie.

"Laos," he said.

I don't have a record of his whole answer, but the words "cost-effective" and "model operation" stay in my mind.

The war in Laos had recently ended, after more than a decade. Its total cost to us was impossible to determine, but certainly ran to many billions of dollars, many thousands of Lao lives, and hundreds of American ones.

For the price, we had bought defeat. Laos was already a colony of North Vietnam when Colby gave his answer and remains one today.

But seen from the perspective of the CIA (rather than that of Laos or the United States), this colossal and bloody flop probably did look like a model operation. Until the party finally ended, the agency had been able to run its own private army and air force, its own aid program, its own clandestine radio network, its own country. Or it enjoyed the illusion that it was doing all these things.

The 'secret' war

In 1970, I was press attache for the United States embassy in Vientiane, the Lao capital. During my daily press briefings on the "secret" war, reporters found it hard to believe that I didn't have more information than I was passing on. They were sure that my embassy colleagues were holding out on me, or that I myself was holding out.

No one ever believed that the embassy knew so little about the war it was paying for. But that was the truth, and must always be in that sort of war.

It was a war without a declaration. A war carried on in the shade, if not in the dark. A remote-control war waged antiseptically. Waged by air, by CIA case officers and the guerrillas they bankrolled, by Lao régulars we advised and supplied but did not command.

It was our new kind of war, pioneered by President John F. Kennedy at the Bay of Pigs - the presidential war.

Presidential wars do not involve drafted American troops. They are "declared" in secret by the White House and carried out by the CIA, foreign troops with volunteer American advisers and, often, the US Air Force. The American public's reaction to these wars has ranged from uninformed and unenthusiastic acceptance to mild disapproval.

These are the presidential wars: Kennedy's invasion of Cuba, Kennedy's and Johnson's early involvement in South Vietnam, Nixon's later involvement in Cambodia and the war in Laos.

The Bay of Pigs was so misconceived that it died almost at birth. The presidential war in South Vietnam drifted into a more conventional one. Nixon's conventional invasion of Cambodia became a purely presidential war when American troops withdrew.

But Laos was a presidential war from beginning to end, lasting from Kennedy's dispatch of counterinsurgency teams in 1961 until Nixon's retreat from Indochina in 1975.